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Dissertation Review by

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University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria

Doctoral student: MA Jasmin Schaitl

Date of birth: 06.02.1987

Title of the doctoral dissertation:

“Perceiving Touch – Being in the Present – Training the Mind Through Artistic Practices.
Haptic Awareness in Performative Practices”

University: The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design, Wrocław

Field and discipline: Doctoral thesis in the field of arts in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation

Review:

In her doctoral thesis “Perceiving Touch – Being in the Present – Training the Mind Through Artistic Practices. Haptic Awareness in Performative Practices”, Jasmin Schaitl sets out to explore how touch can become a generative element in conjuring joyful memories in a viewer, or participant, in her performative artworks. Schaitl takes a two-pronged approach: first, she presents her extensive research on the breadth of appropriate theoretical and scientific investigations, followed by, second, a comprehensive analysis of her own artistic works with references to these theories as well as outside artistic influences.

Almost at the very start of her thesis – in chapter 1.1.1 – Schaitl offers up the multifaceted aspects of touch in a collation of various definitions. To a great extent this serves as a foundation from which she goes on to demonstrate the tremendous scope of her research and interests; a scope, which she develops and expands upon successively in the following chapters. Schaitl, thereby, refers to relevant theories that range from scientific research in the fields of neurobiology, psychology, sociology, emotional behaviour and

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cognitive sciences to art theoretical discourses in the realms of performance and dance, but also meditation, the factor of time and architectural aspects of space and place. This broad theoretical backdrop serves as the underpinnings to her capacious and interrelated interests that all essentially extend out from her initial focus of touch, namely to memory, emotions, imagination, perception, empathy, experience, participation, collaboration as well as time, body and space.

It is in part two that Schaitl expediently interlinks the varied scientific approaches as well as art historical references with her own artistic practice. Thereby not only contextualizing her artistic endeavours, but further embedding these into a wider discourse that goes even beyond the realms of art, entering current scientific research and, moreover, societal concerns, when one considers, for instance, touch in a time where the digital is ever more prevalent, memory at a time when a culture of remembrance is being questioned and empathy in times when conflicts and incomprehension for opposing standpoints are omnipresent. In her artistic works Jasmin Schaitl is able to address such overarching topics on a very personal level in considered and secure settings.

One example being her most recent work “reciprocity” (2021). “Visitors are invited to take a piece of wire in a desired length and hold this wire in their hands while remembering a positive memory”, as Schaitl writes. In this participatory and performative act, thoughts and memories are thus transformed – or translated, as the artist puts it – into material form. The resulting wire shapes vary immensely, as can be seen in the accompanying images. Schaitl accurately pinpoints the transformation of visitors becoming participants leading to a mode of agency within art and artworks of the 1950s and ‘60s referring to important protagonists such as Allan Kaprow and others. It is at this point in time that the traditional role of the audience begins to diversify on a broader scale than had been previously the case, bringing in new forms of engagement and processes of co-creation within artistic processes, as Schaitl points out. This is a potential that Schaitl continually probes and explores in order to “gain new knowledge”, as she puts it, in her own works and which is clearly palpable as one of several red threads running through her practice.

This willingness to probe and explore is furthermore evident in her collaborative approach that goes beyond inviting participation in an audience and involves working together with other artists. While indicating that collaboration as an artistic method has been present from early on, in her thesis Schaitl focusses particularly on her collaborations with the artist Matěj Frank (from 2017 onwards), as well as with the artist Tereza Silon (from 2019 onwards). In these collaborations, Schaitl’s interests in memory and touch come also

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to the fore: memory as in capturing (or archiving) through material means (“Entering Continuities“, 2017-2021, Matěj Frank), as well as memory as being embedded within the body (“The Touch Can Tell: Synesthetic Intimate Memory“, 2019, Tereza Silon); touch as in the traced outlines of feet having touched the paper (“Entering Continuities“), as well as touch as observable activities between two bodies performing and the reiterated sensation of touch in viewers touching their own hands while watching the performance (“The Touch Can Tell“, 2020, Tereza Silon).

The latter evoking a self-reflection in the viewer that is echoed in the short passage at the beginning of chapter 2.4 “Haptic Sense – Hand Space”. It is here that to my mind Jasmin Schaitl has subtly, but succinctly, poetically and, moreover, performatively captured an essence of her artistic practice. Schaitl describes here how the lines she is writing are produced through the touch of her fingers to the keyboard and how, at the same time, while she is writing, she is thinking up the words to make up these very sentences. Then, zooming out to a bird’s eye view, Schaitl completes this conceptual loop by reflecting on the reader perceiving the lines she is typing as words on paper. Her hands acting, thereby, as “translators of her thoughts”, as she writes. All the while the reader is – of course – simultaneously reading these words, following and almost retracing the “performance” of the writer’s process of production in a haptic way, while being reflected within this process at the same time. Schaitl’s “Performances for the Mind“ as a principle, thereby, springs to mind, whereby thoughts and feelings lead to physical sensations.

Thoughts and feelings being translated in multiple ways in the reader, the viewer, the participant, then. Much as in her work series entitled “Wandering Mind“ (2019-2020), whereby drawings are created in direct correspondence to the mind’s focus of attention. Schaitl’s referral to Juhani Pallasmaa’s quote is particularly apt here, wherein he describes the correlation between the mind and the hand, which is drawing what is being imagined. It is this loop between the mind and the action of the hand(s) that also reverberates in the actions of the viewers manifesting their thoughts and memories in wire formations in the aforementioned work “reciprocity”.

The reciprocity of mind and body, as well as the conflation of multiple layers of actions, time, and realities, leads me to a further work of Schaitl’s: “present/presence (body)” (since 2018). In her thesis she states that this is her “first performative work that explicitly intended to support visitors in their retrieval of a positive memory”. In “present/presence (body)”, the artist physically – performatively – impresses the word “NOW” with a basic wooden device onto the visitor’s forearm. It is the sense of touch, the lingering of the

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letters' impression on the skin, the word "NOW" fading from present to past becoming an observable memory, while the participant is invited to "revisit a positive memory" in his or her mind that could be considered in direct correlation to Schaitl's thesis title "Perceiving Touch – Being in the Present – Training the Mind Through Artistic Practices. Haptic Awareness in Performative Practices". Within Jasmin Schaitl's artistic framing, the participant perceives the performed touch haptically: he or she is – physically, mentally and literally – in the present moment – in the "NOW", while gaining a haptic awareness through artistic, performative means.

In linking up some of Schaitl's different works here, it becomes clear that there are tangible and traceable connections between each of them – red lines that continuously weave in and out of each piece, sometimes more immediate, sometimes more subtle, yet ever present. In reading the entire thesis, it also becomes clear how deeply rooted her whole practice is in artistic, as well as scientific and art historical research. These red lines are detectable throughout. And certainly, as Schaitl writes, lines whether drawn, 'lines of thought' or lines made of various materials – thread, tape, ribbon etc. – are a recurring theme within her practice in various ways. And so it is apparent that all her activities – her research and teaching included – are intertwined and extend easily and consistently also to her "Handbook of Performative Practices for Training the Mind" superscribed with "Hands On" (2023). Very engagingly and beautifully illustrated the handbook provides tools to become more at one with oneself: body and mind.

Based on these observations and in my analysis of the concept and the realization of her dissertation, and after taking into consideration the creative output, I hereby fully support Academy Professor Magdalena Grzybowska's endorsement and also recommend an academic Ph.D. title in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation be granted to Jasmin Schaitl, MA.



Signed
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